Old Wine in New Wine Skins: Tombstone Unveiling as a Case of Religious Innovation and Change in Zimbabwean Christianity

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Abstract

This article reflects on the practice of Tombstone Unveiling, a recent phenomenon among Shona Christians in Zimbabwe, as a case of religious change. Historically, many church doctrines and practices have been negative towards African Traditional Religions (ATRs). Shona Christians have reacted by trying to accommodate the two religious traditions and through efforts to replace some Shona religious practices with similar conceptual categories anchored in Christianity. Beyond the reactions of accommodation and replacement are external social factors which include modernisation and urbanisation. It is noted that the dynamics of religious change are not only located at the points of contact between the two religious traditions but are also internal.

Introduction

According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "All religions are new religions every morning. For religions do not exist up in the sky somewhere, elaborated, finished, and static; they exist in men's hearts" (Smith 1959: 34). Religious traditions change as they try to come to terms with the complexities of their environments. This article discusses the tombstone unveiling ceremony as a case of religious innovation and change common in mainline churches in Zimbabwe. The practice of tombstone unveiling became common in the 1980s. As a new phenomenon the practice has elicited various reactions and attitudes primarily relating to its significance and doctrinal implications in the context of Zimbabwean Christianity. Questions have been raised

and suspicions expressed regarding the nature of the rituals and whether they are doctrinally acceptable within Christian churches. Among the main contentions is the suspicion from some Christians, that tombstone unveiling services are a disguised form of the Shona traditional ritual of *kurova guva*. The suspicions are based on the belief that African Traditional rituals are surreptitiously performed earlier or parallel to the Christian ritual. The link of tombstone unveiling to the Shona ritual of *kurova guva* is viewed as problematic because of the alleged link with African traditional religious belief, thereby denoting syncretism.

While the whole issue may be construed as representing a conflict between Christianity and traditional religions, it also raises the dimension of religious innovation from the grassroots. Ezra Chitando and Lovemore Togarasei argue that tombstone unveiling and *kurova guva* are not necessarily connected and that "in most cases the link is an implied one rather than an observable one" (Chitando and Togarasei 2005: 167). Nevertheless, considering perceptions among members within Zimbabwean Christian churches, the connection is frequently made and suggests the strong impact of *kurova guva* among many Shona Christians (Zwana 1999).

As such, this article argues that Tombstone Unveiling is an example of attempts by grassroots Christians to resolve conflicting conceptual categories. The conceptual categories are multifaceted. They do not only represent a progressive tension between Christianity and traditional religions but also in broad terms within each of the two religious entities there is creative tension. This necessity at religious innovation is a product of neo-missionary attitudes to traditional religious practices. Historically, virtually all mainline Christian churches banned *kurova guva* along with other traditional religious practices on the grounds that they were heathen. Yet they failed to develop new forms that would satisfy African spirituality.

The failure by Christian churches to realistically respond to the existential concerns of the Africans has been highlighted by many scholars. Church members are caught in the trap of double lives as they try to commit themselves to church expectations while remaining attached to traditional religious practices. John Mbiti writes: "Unless Christianity and Islam fully occupy the whole person as much as, if not more than, traditional religions do, most converts to these faiths will continue to revert to their old beliefs and practices for perhaps six days a week, and certainly in times of emergency and crisis" (Mbiti 1969: 3). In this article I argue that tombstone unveiling represents the reinvention or negotiation of Christianity and African Traditional Religions (ATRs) as they try to come to terms with multifaceted elements of social change. Tombstone unveiling is an example of religious innovation in the face of modern social challenges which have affected both Christianity and ATRs.

The paper attempts to integrate different perspectives as they are all applicable in my approach, which views tombstone unveiling as a form of religious change that requires a multi-disciplinary analysis. It recognises that religious phenomena are susceptible to trends in their contexts and so this calls for a broader examination of

the practice. Particular attention is given to notions of modernity and urbanisation as well as the ever present tension between Christianity and ATRs. The traditional practice of *Kurova guva* stands out as the main point of tension which raises fundamental doctrinal questions in many Christian churches. It is therefore necessary to examine the ritual and determine its links with tombstone unveiling.

Kurova Guva

In this discussion references to *kurova guva* ritual are confined in broad terms to the Shona. Even among the different Shona ethnic groups, such as Zezuru, Manyika, Karanga, Korekore and Ndau, there are variations in the way the ritual is performed. However, as noted by Bourdillon, there are common features among the different Shona regions with respect to the practice of the ritual (Bourdillon 1987: 243).

Kurova guva, as a life cycle ritual, is performed six or more months after the death of a family member (Gundani 1998: 199). Not every one qualifies to be honoured in this way. The ritual signifies the entry of the spirit of the recent dead into the world of the benevolent spirits—ancestral spirits. It is tied to the notion of the continuation of life and has ethical dimensions as well. Those who did not have offspring in their lifetime, witches or other evil persons do not qualify for *kurova guva*, and would be relegated to being *mashave* (alien spirits). The ritual is therefore very important in Shona traditional religious practice and has been a source of tension in mainline churches (Kumbirai 1977: 123, 127). J. Kumbirai adds:

> The *Kurova guva* ceremony means so much to the Shona that few, if any whether Christian or non-Christian dare omit it. The early missionaries, on the one hand, taught that to take part in the ceremony was a sin against Faith: the Shona Christians, on the other hand, found this teaching challenging the very essence of their understanding of the spirit world. And so behind the scenes *kurova guva* ceremonies went on. (1977: 127)

Failure to perform it may cause misfortunes as well as exposing the family to spiritual and material dangers (Gundani 1998: 199-200). After *kurova guva* the spirit of the dead person will be able to properly look after the family and can possess a member through whom it can communicate with the living members.

When a person dies it is believed that their spirit goes through a dark period when it cannot interact with other spirits and neither can it visit its family or home in any form. It is even deemed to be dangerous and may harm its own family. The home of the deceased is also regarded as "dark" and in a state of chaos during this liminal phase. Family celebratory activities cannot be held at the home. It is taboo

for the spouse of the deceased and unmarried children to engage in sexual activities (Zwana 1999: 5). These prohibitions are a sign of mourning and protection of the family during the delicate liminal phase. Gundani describes *kurova guva* as ritual cleansing whose purpose extends to include the normalisation and reintegration of the spirit of the deceased into the world of the living, as well as that of the ancestors. It suggests reconciliation as well as fellowship in the realms of the ancestral world.

The ritual is preceded by consulting a diviner for guidance. On the day the ritual is performed, usually on a weekend, a beast "dedicated to the spirit of the deceased and to the other ancestral spirits," is slaughtered for the traditional feast (Cox 1992: 63). The gathered relatives proceed to the grave either early in the morning or at sunset (Cox 1992: 63). The ritual friend (*sahwira*), a nephew or grandson, leads the procession to the grave where water or libations of beer are poured on the grave as the spirit of the deceased is addressed (Cox 1992: 63, Gundani 1998: 201). Among some Shona subgroups notably the vaShangwe and Korekore, a thatched conical grass structure similar to the roof of a traditional "kitchen" is built over the grave as *mumvuri* or shelter for the spirit, while in other instances a branch from a special tree may be put on the grave (Bourdillon 1990: 247). The spirit of the deceased is told that he/she is being taken home to look after the family. On their return home the relatives and all gathered will be singing war victory songs celebrating the reintegration of the spirit of the deceased (Gundani 1998: 201-2, Cox 1992: 63-4). According to Cox (1992: 64), successful hunting songs are also sung. Some Karanga and Korekore groups may sing vulgar songs as they approach the homestead symbolising the state of chaos before the reintegration of the spirit of the deceased. Further addresses will be made to the newly reintegrated spirit at the home which may include bestowing the name of the deceased on the eldest son (Zwana 1999: 6). The ritual paves the way for the dissolution of the deceased's estate including the appointment of a male relative who will look after the family, in the case of a male deceased (Bourdillon 1987: 215). The final part of *kurova guva* which may be treated as a separate ritual is *kudzurura*, which Cox describes as the ritual sealing or closing of the grave (1992: 65). It involves the smearing of the whole grave with beer mixed with undigested food from a slaughtered goat (Cox 1992: 65). In some cases only the headstone is smeared.

The structure of *kurova guva* varies from place to place but there are a number of important features which are of significance. The first thing to note is that the ritual addresses the puzzle of death. It signals ". . . the end of a period of mourning and helps the living relatives to come to terms with death" (Zwana 1999: 7). As Gundani argues, the ritual emphasises ". . . the dynamic and personal relationship that exists between the living and the ancestors. *Kurova guva* not only dramatises the common bond between the living and the departed elders; it also underscores and reasserts the Shona people's most cherished value of integral community" (Gundani 1998: 203).

It was not uncommon for those who died in the cities to be buried at their rural homes. While people worked in urban areas they maintained their traditional roots in the rural areas which they regularly visited. As urbanisation took hold some people cut ties with their rural roots and became entirely urbanised. The urban areas became their new world and they developed ties with fellow urbanites. The dead could be buried in urban centres as it became increasingly expensive to transport the bodies to rural areas. Even burial patterns were modified as some traditional forms were either discarded or modified partly due to new Christian values acquired, secular influences or availability of things that could be symbolic in rituals, for example, special tree branches to put on the grave.

The term syncretism is often used in mainline Christianity in a derogatory sense which highlights the religion's exclusivist nature dating back to the missionary era. Christianity's struggle with *kurova guva* dates back to the missionary days when there were consistent efforts by missionary bodies to tame Africans from their traditional religious ways. As an effective means to accomplish this agenda, missionaries created mission stations which served as model villages where traditional practices were prohibited. Mission inhabitants risked expulsion or other sanctions if they participated in traditional rituals. Some Christians at the missions resorted to clandestinely going out to the villages outside the mission to perform traditional rituals. To avoid the wrath of the mission authorities, and at the same time be able to perform *kurova guva*, a ritual to transfer the grave and essentially the spirit of the deceased from the mission cemetery was performed:

> [They] took some soil from the grave of the deceased in the mission cemetery and went with it to the Tribal Trust Lands (communal lands). When they got there the family that wanted to perform *kurova guva* ritual killed a black goat and cut its head off and with some soil which they brought from the mission cemetery buried the goat's head in a new grave. (Gundani 1998: 204)

Similar ritual processes were followed in cases of those who would have died away from home and had to be reburied at home (Gundani 1998: 204, Bourdillon 1987: 247). In other cases they resorted to practicing traditional rituals under the guise of practices deemed acceptable to the churches such as birthday feasts (*bhavadeyi,* or *musande* (to honour a saint), or *bigidina,* literally translated big dinner denoting a great feast (Gundani 1998: 204; see also Kumbirai 1977: 124; Dachs and Rea 1979: 9). In these cases the Christian minister or priest would be invited to participate. Yet well before the ceremony a traditional ritual would have been secretly performed. Paul Gundani notes that *kurova guva* was a special problem for the Catholic Church in spite of the fact that the Catholics were more open to dialogue with traditional religions.

In his article, Gordon Chavunduka (1977: 131-46) examines the tension between traditional medicine and Christian beliefs and employs G.M. Sykes and D. Matza's (1957: 664-70) theory of deviant behaviour to suggest factors which may lead some Christians to be involved in traditional healing practices. The theory is based on techniques of neutralisation from which Chavunduka derives three. According to the first technique, the Church member succumbs to pressure from the family to consult an *n'anga* and participate in traditional rituals on the pretext that he has no control or is doing it for their sake (Chavunduka 1977: 136). In this case he doesn't view himself as being responsible for breaching the church code but would still not want the church authorities to know about it. The second technique is when the church member willingly participates in traditional rituals on the justification that it is the last resort after other means, acceptable to the church had failed. In the third technique, the church member criticises fellow members who attack traditional medicine as hypocrites, arguing that at least in his case he is doing it openly. In all three cases the family plays an important role in the individual's decisions (Chavunduka 1977: 137). As analytical tools these techniques are significant in this paper.

Tombstone Unveiling

Some months after the death of a family member, relatives, in consultation with the church, organise a service which combines memorial and thanksgiving. Usually held over the weekend, church members and the relatives have a vigil at the home of the departed and the following day the minister leads the unveiling of the tombstone. The tombstone, bought before the ceremony, will be covered in a white cloth and is unveiled by or under the direction of the minister. The order of service varies in most cases.

The following is a description of one ritual observed at a Shona village under Chief Seke about 35 kilometres from Harare in 2000. Families of three deceased brothers bought tombstones and erected them on the graves during the week in preparation for the ceremony on Saturday. The actual tombstones were mounted on Friday. Two parallel ceremonies were evident. While preparations were underway for the church ceremony on Saturday morning, the elders were involved in traditional consultations which included the brewing of beer for use in the traditional ceremony. A select group of elders consulted an *n'anga* on behalf of the families in case there were outstanding issues that had to be cleared first. As the sun set on Friday relatives were invited to a short consultation in the main hut where the ancestors including the deceased were addressed. The group proceeded to the graveyard where libations of traditional beer were poured on the grave.

The Christian ceremony was preceded by an all night vigil. The following day at mid-morning the tombstone unveiling service, led by the minister from the local

church, was held. Any evidence of the traditional ritual which had been held before was cleared and even those who had played leading roles in the traditional ritual participated in the Christian service. The structure of the service itself was almost similar to a typical protestant church service. It included hymns and prayers, scripture reading, and a homily from the minister. The second stage involved testimonies from selected speakers. The third stage was the unveiling, where, the minister said a short prayer and removed the white cloth covering the tombstone as some ritual friends ululated and clapped hands. A child was then asked to read the epitaph. Following this, friends and relatives began to lay flowers on the grave after which the minister pronounced benediction. There are variations in the procedure of the ceremony. For example, the full service may be held at the graveside while in some cases part of the service is held in the church or the home of the family and then the congregation proceeds to the grave for the unveiling. Most churches are still to develop an official order of service or appropriate liturgy (see Zwana 1999; Chitando and Togarasei 2005). In some cases there is no preceding vigil and people only gather for the service.

In spite of variations on how tombstone unveiling is performed, there are several salient characteristics. Firstly, the presence of a church priest or minister emphasises a link between the deceased or relatives to the church. This makes the Christian congregation essential, in addition to the close relatives. Non-confessing members of the family participate in the Christian ritual. Generally, although the traditional ritual, whether held secretly or not, is prohibited by most churches most ministers are aware that this is done before or during the Christian rite but some choose to ignore it. The link with a member of the family may be enough to persuade the church to agree to perform a tombstone unveiling ritual even for a non-member.

This raises questions about the perception of about the purpose of the ritual and suggests that the need it fulfils may vary according to families or individuals. The role of the church minister as a religious practitioner may be interpreted variously. For example, to Christians he represents the church and mediates the Christian sacred in the ritual. For non-believers the minister may simply be a facilitator in a ceremony that does not go beyond the physical manifestations.

The ritual serves as an occasion for the fellowship of family, friends, and the congregation in which both kinship and social ties are strengthened, as M.L. Daneel notes in his discussion of *runyaradzo*, a consolation service performed in African Independent Churches, and *kurova guva* (Daneel 1983: 81). Other significant elements that can be observed include thanksgiving, resolution of the problem of death, memorial and to preach to the living. With such a broad spectrum of interpretations the ritual is accommodative. Even traditionalists who do not have a confession of faith to make in the Christian church ritual may see their needs being fulfilled, more so given the room to clandestinely perform their own rituals before or during the

Christian ones. This point emphasises the "tolerance" shown towards ATRs in the face of "intolerant" Christian forms and is actually the former's strong point.

The grave where the ritual is performed is central but beyond it is the stone as a point of contact with the sacred. The grave is sacred as the place where the person, who is now the subject of the ritual, was buried. In as much as there may be attempts in Christian cycles to downplay the role of the grave, the fact that a tombstone unveiling ritual can only be performed at the grave makes it not only essential, but also of great symbolic value. The headstone which is unveiled symbolises the whole person. Virtually all tombstones unveiled are specially made from granite and sold by commercial suppliers. It is uncommon for an ordinary stone to be used in the ritual. A family aspiring to perform the ritual has to afford the tombstone and related expenses. The special stone may replace the ordinary stone but, save for its aesthetic splendour, it still retains its spiritual significance of being a permanent mark and witness. For the modern urban dweller it plays the added role of giving the identity, through the epitaph, of the person buried there. Some inscriptions include scripture references, inspirational quotes or emblems of the church to which the deceased person or their relatives belonged. Biblical justification for the ceremony is made through references highlighting the significance of memorial stone pillars in the Old Testament. In the New Testament references are made to the tomb of Jesus suggesting life beyond death (Zwana: 23ff).

Like the modern tombstone, flowers are a symbol of modernity but their spiritual significance is ambivalent and so they are mainly considered for their aesthetic value. It the traditional context the green branch in *kurova guva*, has spiritual symbolism. It may be argued, nevertheless, that flowers represent love and the beauty of creation but these meanings are not always consciously or openly articulated. The notion of flowers as symbolising the beauty of creation, good relationships, honour, or love is not common in the Shona traditional context. Yet they form a significant part of the ritual.

The association of the white cloth with death is not original to the traditional Shona context and is not evident in both burial rituals and *kurova guva,* although the colour white is, as Victor Turner argues on colour classification in African ritual, one of the three basic colours among the Ndembu (Turner 1967: 60-70). The other two are black and red. Following the results of his fieldwork Turner lists twenty three meanings of white symbolism. Among the twenty three are the following: goodness, purity, power, life, to be without tears, remembrance, cleanliness, and to reveal. In Traditional Shona belief although the colour most associated with ancestors is black, whiteness as Turner suggests represents life and cleansing hence the description of *kurova guva* as *kuchenura* (cleansing). Spirit mediums wear black cloths which are also used in traditional rituals. Yet in some cases black is associated with death and gloom. Although white did not feature in burial and *kurova guva* rituals as a visual colour symbolism, it existed as a conceptual category.

Turner's twenty three conceptions of the colour white overlap with its use in burial and tombstone unveiling rituals. In the Christian context white represents life and the hope of resurrection. At burial the corpse is wrapped in a white shroud. During the tombstone unveiling ceremony the white shroud is removed to symbolise the hope of resurrection to new life. In other interpretations it symbolises bringing the dead back to life. This has a striking similarity with the concept of bringing back home the spirit of the dead. In *kurova guva*, underlying the ritual process are such conceptual themes as thanksgiving, memorial, and marking the end of the period of mourning.

Tombstone unveiling poses a special problem in two basic ways. First, it suggests an attempt by those involved to satisfy the traditional values which are not necessarily consciously contemplated but could be described as subconsciously felt needs. This would apply to three clusters of participants comprising those who profess to be Christians and regard tombstone unveiling as a Christian ritual in its own right without any link to *kurova guva*. Closely related to this group are those particularly in the AIC category and Pentecostal churches, who find the practice of tombstone unveiling unacceptable or unnecessary. Secondly, are those who feel that it satisfies in a Christian way the traditional role of *kurova guva*. Closely associated with this position is what *runyaradzo* or memorial service is for most AICs—a Christian substitute for *kurova guva.* M.L. Daneel writes:

> . . . the Spirit-type churches introduced the good news of the gospel which shifted the focus from an overriding preoccupation with and dependence on the ancestors, to a *ritually dramatised and continuously re-enacted acceptance of the reign of Christ.* This was achieved, not though policy-statements on the ancestors or generalised public condemnations of *kupira mudzimu* (ancestor worship or veneration) but through the substitution of the key-ritual, the *kugadzira* [*kurova guva*] (to set the spirit right) with a Christianised ceremony called *runyaradzo* (consolation) which revolutionises the entire conception of the ancestors. (Daneel 1983: 80)

In mainline Christian denominations, the service of *runyaradzo* is held separately from tombstone unveiling. In this category there is no perceived problem with using structures which resemble *kurova guva*. In this group are Christians who would consult an AIC prophet instead of an *n'anga* with the justification that at least the former is Christian notwithstanding the fact that some of the prophet's practices could be approximated as more or less similar to those of an *n'anga*. Thirdly are those who regard it as a compromise in divided families where there is a struggle between the two extremes of Christians and traditionalists, with those who accept

aspects of both worlds, standing in-between. Whichever position one takes the notion of change is evident.

Modernity and Other Factors for Change

Following the above analysis it is now clear that tombstone unveiling stands at the centre of three contending influences, namely: modernity, ATRs and Christianity. Peter Berger has defined modernity in the following way:

> . . . the transformation of the world brought about by the technological innovations of the last few centuries, first in Europe and then with increasing rapidity all over the world. This transformation has had economic, social, and political dimensions, all immense in scope. It has also brought on a revolution on the level of human consciousness, fundamentally uprooting beliefs, values and even the emotional texture of life. (Berger, 1977: 101)

In Berger's characterisation of modernity, he outlines what he terms dilemmas of modernity. The five dilemmas are: abstraction, futurity, individuation, liberation and secularisation. Abstraction is an essential aspect of modernity and it entails the dominance of processes, technology and institutions which have contributed to the erosion of values, long held worldviews and communal cohesion. Futurity connotes "a primary orientation for both imagination and activity" towards the future (Berger 1977: 103-04). Individuation is the separation of the individual from the community. Where the individual was subject to the authority of a cohesive community, its traditions and culture, individuation provides autonomy. Individuation provides the ground for liberation which entails the freedom of the individual to make own choices. Secularisation as a challenge to religion does not necessarily mean the recession of religion in the face of elements of modernity but that its effect on the nature of religion cannot be ignored. While the impact of these trajectories of modernity varies according to context, the salient feature they produce is greater openness and capacity to, and absorption of, external influences which may cause shifts in traditional belief and practice as much as modern belief and practice. The argument here is that it is not traditional belief and practice which may be influenced to shift their focus but even the so-called modern forms of religious belief and practice. This is because religion is always in creative tension with society. The forms or intensity of that tension is sometimes dependent on the vagaries of specific localities even within a given region.

According to Jean and John Comaroff:

> The creative power of ritual . . . arises from the fact that (i) it exists in continuing *tension* with more mundane modes of

> action, of producing and communicating meanings and values; (ii) its constituent signs are ever open to the accumulation of new associations and referents; and (iii) it has the capacity to act in diverse ways on a contradictory world. (1993: xxi)

Sociologist Michael Bourdillon has written about differentiation in the practice of traditional religion in Zimbabwe. He points out that tradition in urban areas is fragmented under pressure from elements of modernity. He notes, for example, that given the nature of the urban environment, family ties are weakened such that the practice of rituals is more privatised with fewer participants; unlike in the rural areas where family ties still play an important role in traditional rituals (Bourdillon 1990: 264). Christianity, especially in its mainline forms, is perceived as signifying modernity, while ATRs are viewed as relating to a fossilised and irrelevant past (Bourdillon 1993: 86, 89). In her studies of Nyau dance in Malawi, Deborah Kaspin points out that Christianity is a symbol of modernity in the African mindset and it still makes use of African "conceptual categories" (Kaspin 1993: 34). Given its Western background, Christianity is better able to adjust to the elements of modernity. This line of argument cannot be applied to all forms of Christianity given that types of Christianity such as AICs are antithetical to Western forms. Even in cases of mainline churches with historic links to the West, reactions to modernity are not homogeneous. Following this argument, in the practice of tombstone unveiling, family ties are reconfigured such that in the urban context fellow church-goers become part of the extended family or the core group in religious practices, in addition to other social groupings to which one may belong, such as workplaces, burial societies and clubs.

While some scholarly attention has been given to aspects of religious innovation in contemporary Africa more focus, as pointed out by W.M.J. van Binsbergen and R. Buijtenhuijs, has been on AICs (Binsbergen and Buijtenhuijs 1976: 8). A recurrent theme in studies on AICs has been their quest to make Christianity relevant to the African context. In many cases and in a spirit of triumphalism, they have been largely seen as alternatives, antitheses or parallels to mainline Christianity which has tended to remain fixated in the colonial missionary theological paradigms. It is acknowledged that mainline Christianity has for a long time been concerned with the need to preserve its traditions but this does not mean that belief and practice in these religious groups have been static.

Religions do not operate in a vacuum and they are subject to the vagaries of their contexts and the ways in which they respond are opportunities for innovation. I therefore suggest that religious innovation is, in a good number of cases, born out of necessity in response to a host of pressures and challenges rather than out of the deliberate and proactive efforts of ecclesiastical hierarchies or leadership. A lot of effort in the struggle for the relevance of Christianity has been largely confined to

the deconstructionist discourse on the need for relevant forms of religious practice which makes sense in the African context. The main weakness seems to be in the predisposition by some scholarship circles, of advocating for the Africanisation of Christianity, dwelling on such things as liturgy and music which are in themselves "peripheral religious beliefs that do not speak to the core of what it means to be a Christian" (Berg 2005: 47). In the same way, Matthew Schoffeleers notes the tendency by African theologians of avoiding tackling such matters as spirits and witches in their discourses (Berg 2005: 47-8). Nevertheless, while this point seems to be valid, the so-called peripheral religious practices are important but should not be treated in isolation because they are, in many cases, means rather than ends in themselves.

Religious belief and practice are also conditioned by their social and economic contexts. Some practices and beliefs are modified or shed while others are adopted (Bourdillon 1993: 78). Bourdillon contends that some of the factors serving as catalysts for change include the mix of people of various backgrounds in the urban setting where broad based institutions such as the church become rallying points. In the process, the authority of the elders who are pivotal in traditional religious practice is not only eroded but even supplanted by hybrid religious and cultural systems (1993: 76-7). Economic and materialistic aspects, such as changes in the centrality of agriculture and its methods, are adjusted as well (1993: 75). In his study of religious change in Zambia, Wim M.J. van Binsbergen (1981) argues that social, economic and political structures create tensions which force religious change. His use of the word "force" implies that religious change is not always voluntary in so far as the structures of authority are concerned. Relating to the causes of change are both internal and external factors. With reference to indigenous religions, Andrew Walls argues that

> fundamental change in the society; whether environmental change, caused by migration or drastic alteration in the habitat; new modes of exchange, or anything else which alters the mode of personal relationships and the basis on which status is acknowledged; changes in kinship patterns or the community's order brought about by political or economic change or exposure to new pressures from an alien presence. (Walls 1987: 257)

Just as the external factors exert pressure and are a reflection of trends in the world, the internal ones both threaten and challenge beliefs and practices within the religious system. Binsbergen refers to the interrelatedness of the superstructure and the infrastructure in religious change: "The superstructure defines a society's central concerns, major institutions, and basic norms and values" while the infrastructure constitutes "the organisation of the production upon which the participants' lives

depend, and particularly such differential distribution of power and resources as dominate the relations of production" (Binsbergen 1981: 273). Binsbergen further argues that the superstructure legitimates the infrastructure and depends on it such that changes in the infrastructure create tensions and a crisis of relevance for the superstructure. The resolution to the crisis is a reconfiguration of the superstructure to create a new symbolic order. Binsbergen writes:

> A dialectical relation exists between such infrastructural reconstruction and the superstructural solution. For infrastructural requires the co-ordinated action of a large number of individuals; to enable this, new superstructural elements (ideology, new roles within new groups) have to be created. On the other hand, participants take to superstructural reconstruction in response, in the first instance, to their individual existential problems, and not on the basis of a detached scientific analysis of their society's changed infrastructure. (Binsbergen, 1981: 274)

In this whole process, protagonists for change grapple with issues of meaning and relevance which relate not only to the old order but to the possibilities before them as well.

Although causative factors for religious change are many and diverse, they can be broadly ordered into two categories: filling a void or deficit and adjusting to the vagaries of modern demands. African Independent churches on their part operate at the cognitive level of the African cultural environment and so meet the fundamental spiritual needs of their followers using idiom and approaches familiar to them (Bourdillon, 1990: 274-9), although some of them attack traditional practices as evil. This may explain why tombstone unveiling rituals are virtually non-existent in AICs. Given the possibilities of various perspectives and experiences, the resolution process of the infrastructure-superstructure crisis does not necessarily elicit homogeneity and as argued in this article, works its way from the periphery into the religious mainstream.

In his analysis of ways in which indigenous religions have responded to pressure or threats emanating from global religions, Andrew Walls lists eight ways (1987: 267-78). The first response by indigenous religions is recession, whereby the presence of a combination of "the processes of modernization" and world religions may have a negative impact on the hegemony of the indigenous religions as they lose membership to the alien traditions (1987: 267). The second response may be absorption of aspects of the indigenous religion into the dominant religion, or, thirdly, a restatement or appropriation of some features of the World religion. Fourthly, is reduction, in which case, the indigenous tradition shrinks and

commands less influence in society as it is "reduced or confined in its scope" (1987: 271). This may involve secularisation or modification of some practices. The fifth response is invention whereby a religion tries to renew itself by attempting to be relevant through embracing or borrowing from other traditions. Sixth is an attempt to adjust and to be relevant on a more universal scale. Revitalisation is an attempt by advocates of indigenous beliefs to promote the self respect of the religious tradition. The last response is appropriation, which constitutes recognition by Westerners of the dignity of indigenous religious traditions. Walls' eight responses may appear to be primarily concerned with indigenous religions but they have had some impact on the World religions themselves.

Conclusion

The argument in this article is that the emergence of tombstone unveiling is evidence of religious change in both Christianity and ATRs. As religious adherents try to come to terms with different social pressures, adjustments at both the conceptual and practical levels take place. Religious change results as adherents negotiate their beliefs and practices in the face of both internal and external challenges. External pressures come in various forms which include modernity and its attendant elements of secularisation, greater mobility and multiculturalism in urban environments. The increasing salience of the elements of modernity has led to a reduction in the cohesion of traditional society such that kinship networks have been reconfigured and allowed for an increasing role of the church as a new form of extended family. It would be misleading to suggest that the practice of tombstone unveiling is solely an attempt by Christians, particularly in urban contexts, to resolve their nostalgia for African indigenous spirituality. There are indeed significant influences from *kurova guva* but such that at conceptual level for some people tombstone unveiling is perceived as fulfilling, in modified terms, aspirations or pressure to be involved in traditional practices. Christianity may be treated as having a close affinity with modernity but together with ATRs they have been influenced by modernity. Tombstone unveiling in the Zimbabwean context may also be viewed as yet another form of the resolution of death also influenced by forms of remembrance services on a much wider global scale.

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